



Europe's fascist fringe is
awakening again
Melanie Phillips
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COMMENT PAGES OF THE YEAR

Opinion

Smoking (and European regulation) kills

If EU bureaucrats and drug companies throttle the electronic cigarette industry 105,000 lives will be at risk every year

Matt
Ridley



@MATTRIDLEY

Is this the end of smoking? Not if the bureaucrats can help it. Sweden's reputation for solving policy problems, from education to banking, is all the rage. The Swedes are also ahead of the rest of Europe in tackling smoking. They have by far the fewest smokers per head of population of all EU countries. Lung cancer mortality in Swedish men over 35 is less than half the British rate.

Have they done it by being more zealous in ostracising, educating and shaming smokers in that paternalistic Scandinavian way? No — they did it through innovation and competition. In the 1980s Swedes developed a tobacco product called *snus*, which you put under your upper lip. You get the nicotine but not the tar. *Snus* is the most popular and effective way of quitting smoking in Sweden (and Norway).

You will not have seen *snus* on sale in Britain, for the simple reason that the EU banned it. When Sweden joined the EU, it negotiated a special opt-out. To this day, despite abundant evidence that *snus* is saving Swedish lives by the bucket-load, despite advice from experts, and despite a devastating critique of its own feeble defence of the policy, the European Commission remains committed to the *snus* ban.

You may think this is rather an obscure topic with which to occupy such a prominent opinion pulpit as

this page but it is a vital background to the debate about electronic cigarettes — for, if *snus* can halve smoking and lung-cancer deaths, imagine what electronic cigarettes could do. These are objects that mimic the actions of smoking but are maybe 1,000 times safer, and whose sales are doubling each year, without any government encouragement or medical prescription. E-cigarettes may wipe out smoking in a couple of decades. Professor David Nutt of Imperial College describes them as “the greatest health advance since vaccines”.

Tobacco sales are falling in Europe and America and the industry fears it is facing in electronic cigarettes its “Kodak” moment — as when digital photography destroyed a dominant film-camera firm in a flash. Wells Fargo in the USA predicts that e-cigarettes could out-sell cigarettes within ten years.

Surveys show that e-cigarettes are now the most popular method of quitting smoking, despite a lack of

Tar in cigarettes is the killer. Coffee is more dangerous than e-cigs

encouragement from the authorities. Pick up a leaflet from your chemist on how to quite smoking and you will find they are not even mentioned. When I made a speech on this topic in the House of Lords, I was stunned by the enormous response I got from “vapers”, enthusiasts for e-cigs. What was especially startling was how many of them told of trying to quit for decades, then finally succeeding.

Yet, instead of welcoming this technology, the powers that be, in Brussels and Whitehall, are

determined to throw obstacles in its way. Last week the European Parliament voted in support of the Commission's proposal that bans reusable electronic cigarettes and those with a nicotine concentration over 20mg/ml. Our own government is intent on translating these EU restrictions into British law, egged on by the British Medical Association and the big pharmaceutical industry, which burble on about protecting children from a new threat and not wishing to see the renormalising of smoking.

Why are public health officials so resistant? The European Commission frequently displays a precautionary bias against innovation, weighing any risk of a new product, however small, but not the risk of an old product it might replace — hence its attitude to genetically modified crops. In raising the unknown (but small) risks of e-cigarettes, the public health establishment is missing the point. What counts is harm reduction, not perfect utopian safety. Don't let the best be the enemy of the good, said Voltaire. The ban on strong e-cigarettes, the ones preferred by those trying to quit smoking, could prevent the saving of 105,000 European lives a year, according to modelling by London Economics.

And there's the Dunning-Kruger effect, whereby incompetent people are too incompetent to see incompetence. An EU official with a lower second-class degree from the University of Malta so badly mangled the results of 15 scientists on harm reduction by e-cigarettes that they all wrote to correct him.

The British government's medical regulator, the MHRA, sticks obstinately to its belief that medicinal regulation will improve technological progress in e-



Actress Helen Flanagan promotes a brand of electronic cigarette

cigarettes, ignoring reams of evidence that high barriers to entry inevitably stifle innovation. Doctors, represented by the BMA, seem to hate the idea of people buying, rather than being prescribed, products that stop them smoking. Worse, some of the firms advertising e-cigarettes and selling them through Boots are now subsidiaries of Satan itself — the tobacco industry. Not wishing to emulate Kodak, Big Tobacco is rushing to buy up e-cigarette makers. Big Pharma wants regulation of its rivals because it makes a packet out of nicotine replacement therapies (patches and gums), which have a poor track record of helping people to quit. And politicians? Well, they just seem to enjoy banning things.

In short, says Professor Gerry Stimson of the London School of

Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the public health response to e-cigarettes has been dominated by attempts to regain ownership of the issue from a consumer-led self-help movement. “Not invented here” — the old bureaucrat's cry.

The reason these cynical campaigns have succeeded at all is that most of us confuse nicotine with smoking. As far as anybody can tell, nicotine is harmless at the doses present in cigarette smoke. It's the tar that kills. Nicotine is addictive, but so is caffeine, and a cup of coffee has a lot more potentially dangerous chemicals in it than an e-cigarette. Vaping could well be less risky and antisocial than coffee drinking.

Drug firms want to protect their nicotine replacement therapies

Yet so brainwashed are we into thinking that nicotine is harmful that we cannot see an advert for vaping without a Pavlovian revulsion, and spouting a load of tosh about protecting kids from a possible gateway into (rather than out of) smoking. And that ignorance is being exploited by the reactionary opponents of this disruptive and life-saving innovation. They would apparently prefer that smoking continues its very slow, but doctor-supervised, decline over the next 50 years than all but vanish in 20.

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